



From the MixCache.com library

SAMPLE COPY

Madras on Screen: Cinema, Culture, and the Rise of Tamil Film Industry

MixCache.com

SAMPLE COPY

Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** From Madras Presidency to Moving Pictures: Early Exhibitions and Theatres
- **Chapter 2** The Talkies Arrive: Technical Infrastructures and Language Politics
- **Chapter 3** Studio City: The Making of Kodambakkam and the Industrial Ecology
- **Chapter 4** Gemini, AVM, and Vijaya Vauhini: Houses that Built an Industry
- **Chapter 5** Labor Behind the Lens: Crafts, Guilds, and the Everyday of Production
- **Chapter 6** Stories, Scripts, and Scribes: From Dravidian Oratory to Screenplays
- **Chapter 7** Voices of the City: Sound, Music, and the Rise of Playback Singing
- **Chapter 8** Stars in the Making: Industrial Strategies of Stardom
- **Chapter 9** The MGR Phenomenon: Politics, Populism, and the Screen
- **Chapter 10** Sivaji to Superstars: Acting Traditions and Performance Styles
- **Chapter 11** Women on and off Screen: Actresses, Technicians, and Gendered Labor
- **Chapter 12** Censors and Sensibilities: Regulation, Morality, and the State
- **Chapter 13** City as Spectacle: Mapping Madras in Cinematic Space
- **Chapter 14** Rural Turns, Urban Returns: Tamil Cinema's Alternating Gazes
- **Chapter 15** Distribution, Circuits, and Theatres: From Touring Talkies to Single Screens
- **Chapter 16** Fan Clubs and Publics: Participatory Cultures and Civic Life
- **Chapter 17** New Wave Interventions: Balachander, Bharathiraja, and Narrative Modernism
- **Chapter 18** The Mani Ratnam Moment: Form, Finance, and Global Visibility
- **Chapter 19** Television, Video, and the Home: Shifting Audiences and Economies
- **Chapter 20** Diasporic Flows: Overseas Markets, Subtitles, and Satellite Rights
- **Chapter 21** Digital Rollout: Multiplexes, VFX, and New Production Models
- **Chapter 22** Independent and Parallel Currents: Festivals, Grants, and Microbudgets
- **Chapter 23** Language, Caste, and Class: Identity Politics on the Tamil Screen
- **Chapter 24** Chennai after Madras: Renaming, IT Corridors, and Contemporary Urban Imaginaries
- **Chapter 25** Archives, Memories, and Methods: Researching a Century of Tamil Film

Introduction

This book explores how a port city on the Bay of Bengal evolved into a powerhouse of South Asian screen culture. Madras—renamed Chennai in the late twentieth century—became the production and creative hub of South Indian cinema, shaping the aesthetics, labor practices, and public life of Tamil film while influencing Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam industries housed in or orbiting the city. By tracing the interlocking histories of studios, star systems, technology, censorship, and urban representation, the chapters that follow argue that “Madras on screen” and “Madras as screen” are inseparable: the city is both an engine of filmmaking and a recurring character in the films themselves.

Madras’s emergence as a film capital was never inevitable. It took the convergence of geography, infrastructure, and imagination: a harbor that facilitated the import of cameras and raw stock; educational and theatrical institutions that trained performers and writers; electrical grids and laboratories that enabled dependable production; and a bilingual, migratory labor force that could shuttle among languages and craft traditions. The neighborhood of Kodambakkam became synonymous with filmmaking, yet the industry’s lifeblood pulsed through workshops, dubbing rooms, theatres, and distribution offices across the city’s arterial roads and alleyways. This ecology of work knit together artisanal skill and corporate ambition, creating an industrial culture that both borrowed from and remade global cinema practices.

Studios provided the material backbone. Houses such as Gemini, AVM, and Vijaya Vauhini developed a factory model of production while nurturing distinctive styles and reputations. Their floors hosted carpenters, lightmen, makeup artists, editors, and publicists whose often-invisible labor gave Tamil cinema its sheen. Out of this system emerged the modern star—an alchemy of performance, publicity, and fan devotion. The rise of charismatic leads and celebrated character actors created feedback loops between audience expectation and narrative form, reorganizing the economics of risk and reward in film production.

Politics, too, found a durable home in Madras’s studios and theatres. Oratory from the Dravidian movement shaped screenwriting idioms; screen personas fed electoral imaginaries; and fan clubs served as training grounds for civic mobilization. The intertwining of cinema and politics did not occur at the margins but at the center of urban life, recalibrating what it meant to be a citizen, a spectator, and a worker in a rapidly modernizing city. The Tamil screen became a space where questions of language, caste, gender, and class were staged and contested for mass publics.

Technological change continuously reconfigured this landscape. The arrival of

synchronized sound transformed performance and authorship, amplifying writers and lyricists alongside actors. Subsequent shifts—color, widescreen formats, magnetic and then digital sound, video and satellite distribution, multiplex exhibition, computer graphics—reshaped how films were financed, produced, and consumed. Each transition generated new competencies, new intermediaries, and new aesthetics, compelling the industry to reinvent itself while retaining recognizable continuities in song, melodrama, and star-centered storytelling.

Regulatory regimes left equally deep imprints. From colonial-era rules to post-independence censorship boards, the state mediated what could be seen, heard, and imagined on screen. Censorship debates over morality, violence, and political speech did not simply constrain filmmakers; they also prompted stylistic innovation and allegorical storytelling. Municipal bylaws, union contracts, and tax policies further structured the rhythms of production and exhibition, revealing the film industry as a negotiated space of law, labor, and desire.

Finally, the city itself—its beaches and boulevards, slums and suburbs, studios and flyovers—has been a recurring subject of representation. Madras on screen oscillates between a cosmopolitan dreamscape and a site of everyday struggle. Films have mapped neighborhoods and refashioned them, turning locations into landmarks and landmarks into myths. As the city transitioned to “Chennai,” with IT corridors and new skylines, cinema reimaged urban life while grappling with memory and displacement, continuity and change.

The research underpinning this book draws on interviews with actors, directors, technicians, exhibitors, and censors; on archival materials such as studio ledgers, publicity booklets, trade journals, and court files; and on close readings of films across eras and genres. It is written for film scholars and cultural historians, but also for readers curious about how a modern media city takes shape. By following the circuits of capital, craft, and culture that radiate from Madras, we will see how a regional industry forged global connections—and how a city, repeatedly projected and replayed, helped to create the very cinema that depicted it.

CHAPTER ONE: From Madras Presidency to Moving Pictures: Early Exhibitions and Theatres

Before the flickering images of cinema graced the screens of Madras, the region, then known as the Madras Presidency, already possessed a vibrant culture of public entertainment. This sprawling administrative subdivision of British India, encompassing much of present-day South India, was a melting pot of theatrical traditions, musical performances, and storytelling that laid fertile ground for the nascent moving pictures. The late 19th century witnessed a surge in Tamil-language commercial theatre, particularly musical dramas or *isai natakam*, which captivated audiences with mythological episodes and elaborate productions. These travelling drama companies, often headquartered in places like Madurai for Tamil-speaking troupes, were adept at reaching diverse publics, even journeying as far as Rangoon, Colombo, and Jaffna.

The Parsi theatre companies from Bombay also played a significant role, bringing Urdu-language spectacles to Madras and influencing local drama in terms of stagecraft, musical styles, and narrative themes. These itinerant troupes set up tents in public spaces like the Esplanade Maidan, now the site of the Madras High Court, long before cinema became a common sight. English theatricals also had their niche, catering to the British community and performed in venues ranging from army barracks to private villas. This rich tapestry of live performance instilled in the people of Madras a communal appreciation for visual storytelling and a readiness for novel forms of spectacle.

The year 1897 marked a pivotal moment when the first moving pictures were publicly exhibited in Madras. A European exhibitor screened a selection of silent, non-fictional short films at the Victoria Public Hall. These initial cinematic offerings were essentially filmed records of everyday events, a far cry from the elaborate narratives that would later define Tamil cinema. Nevertheless, these early screenings sparked curiosity and demonstrated the commercial potential of this new medium. Soon after, regular ticketed shows commenced in a hall on Popham's Broadway, run by a Mrs. Klug, though this venture proved short-lived.

The novelty of moving pictures quickly led to more permanent structures. Warwick Major, a Western entrepreneur, established the Electric Theatre, which became a favorite haunt for the British community in Madras. This early cinema house, located on Mount Road (now Anna Salai), screened silent films, though it eventually closed down and its building is now part of a post office complex. Another early venue, the Lyric Theatre, also on Mount Road, featured a variety of entertainment including

English plays, Western classical music concerts, ballroom dances, and, as an added attraction, silent films.

A significant leap in the evolution of cinema exhibition in Madras came with the concept of "tent cinemas" or "touring talkies." Swamikannu Vincent, a railway draftsman from Tiruchirapalli, emerged as a pioneer in this field. In 1905, he purchased a film projector and silent films from a Frenchman named Du Pont and embarked on a journey as a travelling exhibitor. Vincent erected tents in various locations to screen films, and this mobile exhibition model quickly gained popularity, allowing moving pictures to reach a wider audience beyond the confines of urban centers. These tent cinemas were a truly democratic form of entertainment, often offering different classes of tickets, from sitting on the sand floor to benches and chairs, making cinema accessible to people from all walks of life.

The year 1909 brought a notable event that further cemented cinema's presence in Madras: a grand exhibition organized to commemorate King George V's visit. A major highlight of this exhibition was the screening of short films accompanied by sound, a technological marvel at the time. A British company imported a "Crone megaphone," a device that linked a film projector to a gramophone with a pre-recorded sound disc. While this setup produced synchronized picture and sound, it lacked lip-synched dialogue, which would arrive later with the talkies.

Raghupathi Venkaiah Naidu, a successful photographer, acquired this groundbreaking equipment after the exhibition and set up his own tent cinema near the Madras High Court. His screenings of short films like *Pearl Fish* and *Raja's Casket* at the Victoria Public Hall proved to be a success, leading him to expand his tent cinema operations to the Esplanade. Venkaiah Naidu's entrepreneurial spirit extended beyond Madras; he toured with his mobile unit to Burma (now Myanmar) and Sri Lanka, accumulating sufficient funds to establish a permanent cinema house in Madras.

In 1914, Raghupathi Venkaiah Naidu opened the Gaiety Theatre on Mount Road, marking it as the first cinema house in Madras to be built and owned by an Indian. The Gaiety quickly became a prominent fixture, screening imported films, often in serial format, where audiences would return for weeks to watch an entire movie unfold. Other early permanent theatres soon followed, including the Crown at the end of Mint Street and the Globe in Purasawalkam, both inaugurated in 1915. The Globe was later renamed Roxy and remained operational for many years under different managements before its eventual demolition.

The early 20th century also saw the establishment of other significant theatres. The Wellington Theatre, for instance, opened in 1918 at the corner of Mount Road and General Patters Road. Initially, it catered primarily to European audiences with English films, but its operations were later Indianized by the founder's sons. Mount Road rapidly transformed into a vibrant hub for theatres, with venues like Elphinstone,

Gaiety, and later, Anand and Shanti theaters, drawing crowds. The Broadway area also boasted cinemas such as Minerva, which is now known as Batcha Theatre. Minerva holds a unique place in Madras cinema history, becoming the first air-conditioned theatre in the city and the entire Madras Presidency in 1949.

While the exhibition landscape was developing, the seeds of film production were also being sown. R. Nataraja Mudaliar, an automobile parts dealer, shifted his focus to cinema and established The Indian Film Company studio in Madras in 1916. He went on to produce *Keechaka Vadham* (1917-1918), considered the first silent film in South India, and also the first Tamil film. This pioneering effort marked the beginning of Madras's journey from merely exhibiting films to actively producing them, laying the groundwork for its future as a cinematic powerhouse.

The burgeoning film industry in Madras Presidency in these early years faced the challenges of a nascent art form, including technological limitations and the absence of sound recording facilities in the region. Until the mid-1930s, producers often had to travel to cities like Bombay or Calcutta for their talkie film productions, where sound recording infrastructure was available. Despite these hurdles, the enthusiasm for cinema was undeniable, fostered by a population accustomed to diverse forms of public spectacle and eager for new experiences. The early exhibitors, with their touring tents and nascent permanent theatres, played a crucial role in cultivating this widespread appreciation for the moving image, setting the stage for the dramatic growth that would follow.

This is a sample preview. Purchase the book to read the full content.

Visit MixCache.com to purchase the complete book.

SAMPLE COPY